

The past that comes back to haunt us

Gerry Conlon and his cousin Vincent Maguire, victims of two of Britain's worst miscarriages of justice

GERRY: I did 15 years in prison for a crime I did not commit. I was 20 when I went in and 35 when I came out. In October 1974 I'd been accused of the Guildford pub bombings, along with Paul Hill, Carole Richardson and Paddy Armstrong. We became known as the Guildford Four.

I'd grown up in Belfast and, like the rest of my family, I'd no connections with republicanism or nationalism. As a young man all I wanted to do was get a job, go out and have a drink, go to discos. But in the early 1970s, Belfast was in the thick of the Troubles and I wanted to get away from it all. So in August 1974 I came to London to get work. I'd actually been coming over since I was a child because I had aunts and uncles here, including Paddy

they forced me to make a false confession saying I was involved.

In the course of my interrogation I mentioned Vincent's mum and dad, and on December 3 they were also arrested, as were Vincent and Patrick, Anne's brother, Sean Smyth, and a family friend, Pat O'Neil. So, too, was my father. Though he was ill with emphysema — he couldn't walk 50 yards without stopping two or three times — he'd come over to help find me a solicitor. They became known as the Maguire Seven and were all charged with possession of nitroglycerine. And they too went to prison for a crime they did not commit. Five years later, in January 1980, my father died in prison. His last words to me were: "My death is what's needed to open up this case. It will ultimately prove your innocence, and when

Back home in Belfast, family relations had broken down. While I'd been in prison, my mother and two sisters had had to deal with the trauma of it all, and above all with the death of my father. When I came out, Mum was just a shell of a woman. She couldn't talk about any of it. It was just too painful.

But sure enough the past came back to haunt me. Hallucinations, nightmares, violent flashbacks... Sleeping pills and sedatives either became addictive or didn't work. I became desperate, I turned to drink, to drugs, I became suicidal. I put myself into some dark situations. Sometimes it was to blot things out. Other times it was to try and relive the fear I'd been put through. I'll never forget the time I was handcuffed and driven to a country lane. There three policemen dragged me out. One put a gun to my head. Another put a gun in my mouth. Even today, I still think what it would be like to put a gun in my mouth and pull the trigger.

Even with our convictions overturned, I felt responsible for the suffering Vincent and his family went through. I still beat myself up about it. Reconciliation between our families didn't happen overnight. It took years. But it was Vincent in particular who was the most receptive towards me, who acted as a bridge between us,

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and Annie Maguire, and my cousins, their four children, Vincent, John, Patrick and Anne-Marie.

By that November, a few weeks after the Guildford bombs, I was back home and the police had not found the bombers. That month, as a reaction to the IRA's mainland bombing campaign, parliament rushed through emergency legislation. The new Prevention of Terrorism Act allowed the police to detain suspected terrorists for up to seven days with the home secretary's authority.

The next day I was arrested. A friend of mine, Paul Hill, brought in for questioning about the bombing, had mentioned my name. I was taken to a Belfast police station, where I was beaten and interrogated. Then I was flown to a police station in Guildford, where it was all repeated. In the end

that day happens, you go out and prove my innocence and the innocence of the Maguire Seven."

Nearly 10 years later we finally got our justice. In October 1989 the Court of Appeal quashed the sentences on the Guildford Four. Gareth Peirce, my lawyer, said to me that getting out had achieved something, but that it would mean nothing if we didn't use this moment to expose the hypocrisy of the judicial system, so I threw myself into getting my father's name cleared, and getting Vincent and his family's names cleared. In June 1991 their convictions were quashed too. After that I campaigned to get the Birmingham Six out. It sort of became my calling. It still is. I also did an autobiography, *Proved Innocent*, which was made into a film called *In the Name of the Father*.





Main picture: Gerry (right) and Vincent today. Right: Gerry and his sister, Ann, rejoice as he walks free in October 1989, after being wrongly jailed for the 1974 Guildford pub bombings



and I will be forever grateful to him for that. I've always loved him and today I have enormous respect for his strength of character and his humility. He's an inherently decent, kind, understanding and nonjudgmental man. And I know I'll have his support as I continue to ask why, to this day, no one has been held responsible for what happened to our families.

VINCENT: When my mum was arrested the press had a field day.

One paper said that instead of making apple pies she was making bombs. Then at our trial, which opened at the Old Bailey on January 12, 1976, the prosecution said our house was the bomb factory, my mum was the master bomb-maker and was using me, my brother and other members of her family to get rid of the bombs. Sir Michael Havers, who led the team, said that when my Uncle Giuseppe, Gerry's father, arrived at our house, it was all hands to the pump to get rid of any evidence.

This tragic string of events was triggered when my cousin Gerry was picked up as a suspect for the Guildford pub bombings and, in the course of being interrogated, mentioned my mother and father. In one fell swoop they arrested my parents, my youngest brother, Patrick, Giuseppe, Sean Smyth, my mother's brother, Pat O'Neil, a family friend and me — the Maguire Seven. Patrick and I were only 13 and 16 at the time. And we were all wrongly convicted. Mum and Dad got 14 years, my brother four, and me five. I served nearly 3½

years and Patrick served three.

Of course, when we were let out, everyone still saw us as terrorists. Mum and Dad, who were still inside, asked me to keep the rest of the family together. I did my best and returned to our old neighbourhood, though our family home had had to be given up. While we'd been inside, my brother John had married, but they were going through a bad time, and my sister was going off the rails. She was only eight when we were arrested and had moved from one relation to another.

I think I knew that to go deep into myself, to question my feelings, might break me. So, from then on, I just wanted to get on with life and find a job I could throw myself into. That was my way of blocking out what had happened. It gave me no time to reflect. My first job was working in the kitchens of a hospital. Two years after getting out, I got married — though it didn't last very long — and I became a father.

When Mum and Dad came out it was very difficult. Dad had become institutionalised and, although Mum always looked after him right up until his death seven years ago, they lived apart. With her family and her religion to give her strength, Mum, like me, just kept going. She got a job as a cleaner in a pub and helping special-needs children. The small amount of compensation we received came years later. She's 74 now and I see her every day.

But of all of us it was Patrick who most clearly began to suffer from post-traumatic stress. He was very angry and he drank too much and it's been like that, off and on, ever since. Five years ago he became addicted to cocaine. He's trying to get help but he's had to pay for it himself, and he's still not right.

The day Gerry came out in 1989 I was playing pool in a pub. It came up on a TV newsflash and everyone stood round watching it.

I just listened and carried on playing. There was still a fear, a paranoia, about people knowing who you were. You didn't know how they'd react. So I kept quiet. And, to be honest, there was a lot of animosity between our two families then, so Gerry and I never saw one another much. But, bit by bit, that has changed. Now the bond between Gerry and me is stronger than ever.

When Gerry was freed, he threw himself passionately into clearing the name of his father and my family. I admire him hugely for that. And when that was done he went on to battle for others who'd suffered similar injustices. And today he still campaigns for Mojo [Miscarriages of Justice Organisation], which was co-founded by Paddy Hill, one of the Birmingham Six, to help innocent people in prison.

In the meantime the key players in our convictions — Sir John Donaldson, Sir Michael Havers, and Peter Imbert — have received one promotion after another. And in February 2005, Tony Blair, on behalf of the British government, apologised to the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven. Gerry, his two sisters, me, my mum, Patrick, John and Anne-Marie were all there, and at the end of that apology, Blair assured us that at last we'd get the help any of us needed in dealing with post-traumatic stress. It is 2009 now and we've heard nothing. Blair's promises were empty.

But at the end of the day it wasn't Tony Blair I wanted an apology from. I wanted it from the police, the forensic experts and all the other people who knew we were innocent and put us away in the first place. As Gerry and I both know in our hearts, those are the only apologies that will really count ■

**Interviews by Ria Higgins.
Main portrait by Dirk Lindner**